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Covert Action: The Limits of Intervention in the Postwar World by Gregory Treverton

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One of the more remarkable revelations of last summer's Iran-*contra* hearings was just how wrong the conventional wisdom was on the "problem" of covert actions in a democratic society. Far from proving that rogue operations by American intelligence agencies were still out of control, and therefore in need of greater congressional and press oversight, the sessions showed just the opposite. It turned out that John McMahon, the CIA's deputy director for operations, and much of the rest of the professional CIA bureaucracy either did not know of, or were opposed to, the plans that took shape in the National Security Council.

The problem, of course, was not an institutional bias on their part toward secrecy and covert action. It was the CIA's unwillingness to cooperate that led its own director to work around his bureaucracy and assist a group of political appointees in the White House in running the operation themselves. As far as institutional arrangements for controlling the CIA's covert operations are concerned, our system (as it was modified in the late 1970s) worked perfectly well—recognizing, of course, that the system was never meant to correct the bad judgment of high officials in the White House.

I think, after reading *Covert Action*, that Gregory Treverton believes this, but he does not altogether resist the temptation to interpret the Iran-*contra* affair as an extension of the old CIA bogey. Drawing heavily on the author's experiences on the staff of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in the mid-1970s, the issues and analysis in this book have a slightly dated quality to them, concentrating on well-known covert actions of the past, including Guatemala and Iran in the early 1950s, the Bay of Pigs, Chile in the early '70s, and support for the non-Marxist factions in the Angolan civil war. While the book discusses the Reagan administration and the Iran-*contra* affair, it was obviously begun before the imbroglio was revealed and completed before the author had time to incorporate the information provided by last summer's hearings. His analysis of the CIA and its limitations as an institution thus apply primarily to a period of history that has been over for some time now.

Covert Action's historical account provides a useful and readable primer on the uses and abuses of covert intervention. The book argues that the CIA was a victim of its own early successes. Owing to its origins in the wartime OSS, the CIA always gave pride of place to covert operations over the more mundane function of intelligence analysis. By 1952 the Directorate of Plans (forerunner of the current Operations Directorate) consumed 74 percent of the CIA budget and three-fifths of its personnel, nearly 6,000 people in 47 overseas stations—though much of this effort was directed at espionage rather than covert action. The early 1950s saw two stunning successes, at least in terms of the CIA's own objectives, in Iran and Guatemala. Both had common features: they were relatively cheap and small scale, relying more on psychology and wits than on brawn, and they were kept low-key and relatively secret (even though news of the Guatemala plans leaked out ahead of time).

BUT THE circumstances that led to these successes were not repeatable, according to Treverton. Most important was the changing nature of the Third World itself. The days when the United States could get its way through simple intimidation are now clearly over. In the Iran of 1953, Ambassador Loy Henderson turned the tide against Mossadeq by simply threatening to withdraw all Americans living there; in Guatemala, Arbenz grounded his air force because of a single propaganda broadcast that led him to believe his pilots had started to defect. Already by 1961 the discipline and control of the revolutionary Cuban regime was evident when the expected uprising against Castro failed to materialize. While many Iranian émigrés continue to believe that the CIA can pull strings behind Khomeini's back, America's inability to influence the internal politics of revolutionary Iran has been painfully evident for a decade now.

Covert operations are problematic for other reasons as well. Policy-makers frequently plan covert operations thinking that they will remain small and deniable, but such actions tend to acquire a momentum of their own. Dissident groups in Third World countries are notoriously difficult to control: we frequently have to work with unsavory characters whose purposes do not coincide with our own, and who have a stake in misrepresenting their goals to gain our support. There is ample opportunity, moreover, for misinterpreted signals: witness the case of Chile, where collecting information on possible coup attempts in the military may well have been taken by the actual plotters as a signal of American backing.

These sorts of observations lead Treverton to rules of thumb that "amount to setting a higher threshold for the use of covert action." He agrees with Cyrus Vance that the language of the National Security Act of 1947 authorizing covert activities in areas "affecting national security" is too broad, and argues along with Vance that they should be permitted only in cases "absolutely essential" to national security. Treverton comes down squarely in favor of the remedy from the 1970s, that Congress needs to be a partner along with the executive in the discussion and approval of intelligence operations. He also concludes that much of what traditionally has been done covertly, such as financial support for democratic groups like labor unions and churches, can be and in many cases is better done out in the open.

Yet settling for Vance's test that an action be "absolutely" essential to American security begs precisely the questions Treverton has raised in his critique of covert operations. For the difficulties he singles out as obstacles to effective covert intervention in fact apply to foreign policy as a whole, covert and overt. Defining priorities among competing interests and assessing the means of protecting them are challenges that go far beyond covert operations; you don't solve them by affixing the label "absolutely essential," or by making them overt.

TAKE THE problem of expanding commitment, which Treverton isolates as a problem of Third World covert

intervention. The inability to call it quits at an opportune moment has been the central difficulty bedeviling the United States in two rather overt interventions, the Korean and Vietnam wars, as well as the more recent debacle in Lebanon. In most respects, the problem is more severe in overt cases. Only then are presidents tempted to make high-minded statements like the Truman, Eisenhower or Carter doctrines, that such-and-such a country or group is vital to the security of the United States. Democratic politics inclines us toward trenchant distinctions between friends and enemies, and a publicly sworn friend tends to develop strong domestic constituencies.

By contrast, an ally covertly supported is much easier to sell out when the going gets tough, as Treverton admits occurred in the cases of the Kurds in Iraq and the Montagnards in Vietnam. The same applies to the problem that our allies' purposes are not our own: we did not choose to ally with Joseph Stalin during the war for the lovely color of his eyes, nor were we particularly happy with the various Rhees, Diems, Marcoses, Salazars, and Chuns with whom we had very open and explicit agreements. But even democratic allies such as Israel have at times led us down paths of their own choosing. This is hardly a characteristic unique to covert action; it is a staple of international life.

THE TRUTH IS that almost nothing in United States foreign or defense policy is *absolutely* essential, including the defense of NATO Europe. And yet there is a large category of operations that are quite important to our interests, which have traditionally been run by the Operations Directorate of the CIA and which cannot be carried out by any other government agency. The best illustration is perhaps the most important CIA undertaking of the 1980s, support for the Afghan *mujahideen*, which Treverton fails to discuss at any length. (He also skips over a number of important CIA successes supporting democratic forces in Western Europe in the late 1940s, as well as Edwin Lansdale's help to Philippine Defense Minister Ramon Magsaysay and other Southeast Asian leaders in the early '50s.)

While the support operation in Afghanistan was never truly covert, it was quiet, so as not to embarrass the Pakistani government and embroil it unnecessarily with the Soviets. It was not a program that could have been easily administered by the military services or the parts of the Defense Department concerned with security assistance: the bulk of the assistance was military, but dealing with the political sensitivities of the Pakistani authorities and the different insurgent groups required a deft political touch, and also the ability to provide unconventional items such as Soviet-bloc military hardware. Like aid to the *contras*, the Afghan effort was one of Washington's worst-kept secrets. Still, it bids fair to be an undeniable success of two administrations, substantially driving up the costs of Moscow's Afghan adventure (as well as spurring the Soviets in their reconsideration of the Brezhnev legacy in the Third World) and possibly paving the way for a real Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Contrary to Treverton's assertion that operations like Afghanistan are becoming less common, they are a phenomenon new to the 1980s—a response to the expansion of the Soviet empire that took place in the previous decade. Given the declining utility of conventional military force in the contemporary world, support for democratic revolutions not just against Soviet client states but against other oppressive Third World regimes has the potential to become a very important instrument of American policy in the future.

IT IS NEVER clear whether the focus of *Covert Action* is the generic category of covert-type operations in American foreign policy or the way they have been implemented by one specific institution, the CIA. If it is the latter, there is not much to write about, since the agency's Directorate of Operations was defanged over a decade ago. Yet as an analysis of the former, Treverton's book is less a diagnosis than a symptom of the disease afflicting contemporary American foreign policy. In calling for more openness as the cure for the problems of covert operations, he fails to confront more important requirements for the conduct of American foreign policy as a whole.

As a great power, the United States must base its policy on a fairly broad sense of national interest. Since the United States is a very secure nation, we don't need to spend much time defending vital national security interests. Rather, we must assign a just and prudent value to the vast majority of our foreign policy concerns, which are non-essential. A great power also has to be able to see shades of gray among friends and enemies, which can be a similarly subtle enterprise. In the Third World in particular, there are only shifting and temporary convergences in the interests of foreign powers and our own.

Assessing means is as problematic as settling on ends. A great power has to be able to accept setbacks and tactical retreats, and also be willing to stick to the game over the long haul rather than succumb to swings between euphoria and discouragement. Such a stable but agile policy often means seizing opportunities when they arise and betting on causes that don't have an immediate payoff. Treverton rightly points to many of these challenges to U.S. foreign policy and its failures to meet them. But he mistakenly attributes those failures to covert operations when they are in fact exacerbated by the open nature of our policy-making process. It is the need to mobilize public support that tends to encourage the simple, shortsighted strategies; public opinion likes clear lines between friends and enemies, is seldom tolerant of short-term failures, and often fails to see the point of salting away capital to build toward long-term success.

If American foreign policy is to evaluate stakes and objectives prudently, make tactical adjustments, and adhere to principles consistently over the long run, then what it may need is less rather than more exposure to the influence of domestic American politics. I do not mean this in any narrow sense of expanding the scope of responsibilities of the Directorate of Operations of the CIA, or stamping more "Top Secret" labels on documents. Obviously American foreign policy must rest on a broad public consensus over our national purposes. But the question is whether the U.S. government as a whole, acting within that consensus, can formulate and carry out foreign policy with some degree of buffering against the vagaries of domestic politics. Vance's test of "absolute" essentiality—or Caspar Weinberger's six conditions for military intervention—are rules of thumb more appropriate for a giant Switzerland than for the United States as it has conceived itself in the postwar period. Our failure to diagnose ourselves properly spells trouble in the future, not only for the United States but for all the other countries that depend on us as well.

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